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ABSTRACT

Anyone who teaches or has taken a course in intercultural communication inevitably faces the task of defining culture. The purpose of this paper is to provide examples and suggestions for using film segments to help students understand some of the conceptual components of culture using different perspectives than those to which they may be accustomed. Many students almost automatically equate intercultural communication with interactions between people from different countries. While much research does focus on cultures from various countries, students should also be aware of co-cultures and counter cultures that exist within their own country. Film segments featuring persons with disabilities, inner city runaways, gangs, the gay and lesbian community, and the elderly, for example, can help cast a different perspective for students on what constitutes "culture." Using film, supported by literature discussing various co-cultures, can be very fruitful for introductory or conclusionary discussions of culture as well as throughout the course when discussing elements such as nonverbal communication, stereotypes, and cultural adaptation. (Contains 21 references.) (Author/CR)

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"What Exactly Do You Mean by 'Culture'?"

Using Films in the Intercultural Communication Classroom

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Running head: FILM IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Anyone who teaches or has taken a course in intercultural communication inevitably faces the task of defining culture. The purpose of this paper is to provide examples and suggestions for using film segments to help students understand some of the conceptual components of what constitutes a culture from different perspectives than they may be accustomed to. Many students almost automatically equate intercultural communication with interactions between people from different countries. While much of the research does focus on cultures from various countries, students should also be aware of co-cultures, and counter cultures that exist within their own country. Film segments featuring persons with disabilities, inner city runaways, gangs, the gay and lesbian community, drag queens, and the elderly, for example, can each help cast a different perspective for students of what constitutes culture. Using film, supported by literature discussing various co-cultures can be very fruitful for introductory or conclusionary discussions of culture as well as throughout the course when discussing elements such as nonverbal communication, stereotypes, and cultural adaptation.

"What Exactly Do You Mean by 'Culture'?"

Using Films in the Intercultural Communication Classroom

Courses devoted entirely to intercultural communication can be found with more and more frequency in the college catalogs of the 1990's. As with any course, instructors are challenged to present the material in a way that students can understand and which provokes thoughtful discussion. Feature films have the power to do both. This paper will first provide a rationale for using film in the intercultural communication classroom. Next, the elements of culture most commonly included in introductory textbooks will be addressed. Most importantly, films are reviewed and suggestions are made regarding discussion of the concepts covered in the films, as well as applications. Ultimately, the films can be used collectively to help students define what constitutes culture and to broaden their understanding of co-cultures.

Film in the Classroom

Use of film in the communication classroom is not new (Proctor & Johnson, 1994; Proctor, 1995). Instructors have used films to illustrate small group communication concepts (Bourhis, 1992; Johnson & Iacobucci, 1995; Shields & Kidd, 1973), conflict management (McGowan, 1993), critical thinking (Proctor, 1993), interpersonal communication concepts (Proctor & Adler, 1991), and communication theory (Adler, 1995). Films can substitute for experiences which are unavailable to students (O'Mara, 1991). Films can capture students' attention, provide a departure from

lecture, and provoke fruitful discussion especially if guidelines for viewing are provided beforehand (O'Mara, 1991; Proctor & Adler, 1991). An entire class entitled "Interpersonal Communication in Film" has even been proposed (Proctor, 1990).

Surprisingly, aside from convention papers (O'Mara, 1991) dealing with such films as *Witness, Like Water for Chocolate, The Wedding Banquet*, and *The Joy Luck Club*, little is available on using films to illustrate intercultural communication concepts. It is always useful to have recent films available as discussion vehicles in the classroom. Hopefully, this paper will contribute to filling a void by providing a helpful reference for other instructors who face the challenge of teaching intercultural communication.

The main goal of this paper is to provide reviews of films which illustrate intercultural communication concepts and which can be used collectively to help students structure a definition of culture. The films chosen for review will expose students to co-cultures which might not be in their preconceived definitions of culture. Through watching and discussing the films and the co-cultures and counter cultures they feature, students may gain a clearer understanding of the elements of culture which affect communication.

Elements of Culture

Before reviewing the films, it is necessary to provide at least a general survey of the most common elements of culture addressed in introductory textbooks. Discussion of each of these

elements can be expanded in the classroom with references to the films. It is possible to integrate the films into the structure of almost any textbook.

Lustig and Koester (1993) mention several aspects of culture which will affect communication. They explain that culture is learned from the people with whom we socialize. Culture is a set of shared perceptions among a large group of people. Culture helps define our beliefs, values and world view. Finally, culture affects our behaviors, we act based on the norms, rules and expectations of the culture of which we are a part.

Porter and Samovar (1988) define culture as "the deposit of knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, timing, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a large group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving" (p 19). Even this definition with all its components is incomplete. Still, it gives an idea of some of the common elements of culture.

Finally, Dodd (1995) defines culture as "the holistic summation and interrelationship of an identifiable group's beliefs, activities, institutions, and commercial patterns" (p.34). He too asserts that culture is learned, and that it sets an agenda for rules and rituals. Further, culture reinforces values and teaches us how to relate to each other. Cultural identity, attitudes, nonverbal and linguistic elements, roles,

political and kinship systems, and world view are all included among the elements of culture.

Obviously, culture can be defined narrowly and broadly depending on what elements are included and excluded from that definition. For example, the above mentioned texts address co-cultures, subgroups, and deviant subcultures. However, some would argue that gangs and gay people comprise co-cultures, while others would argue they are merely deviant subgroups who display only certain elements of a culture (Porter & Samovar, 1988). This paper provides reviews of films which can help students wade through the process of defining culture for themselves. The more students understand co-cultures, the easier communication with them will be. Students should be able to apply all the concepts and definitions of intercultural communication to the films and discuss whether the people portrayed in the films belong to a different culture.

Suggestions for Use

Proctor and Adler (1991) provide very salient suggestions when using film in the classroom. First, films should always be previewed by the instructor. This is essential to the role as discussion leader. More importantly, students need to be warned of any potentially offensive scenes and given the opportunity to view the film outside the classroom.

Second, while the film may be entertaining, this is not the primary goal in showing it. Instructors need to keep the students on task by giving them general guidelines for viewing

(e.g. what are the values of the people in the movie, how do they communicate among themselves and with others, how is the culture learned or transmitted). The goal is to apply course concepts to the film and students should not lose sight of this. Additionally, teachers are required to have an instructional purpose when using films in order to avoid copyright infringements. Similarly, instructors should always discuss the stereotypes and dramatization involved in films and be able to provide resources where students can obtain more realistic accounts of the cultures portrayed in the film (O'Mara. 1991).

Finally, students are more receptive to recent, mainstream films. Respecting this, the films reviewed for this project were all released within the last five years. Each year several movies are released which deal with culture and intercultural communication. It behooves instructors to actively search for new media which helps illustrate and improve intercultural communication through active discussion.

Reviews

To facilitate implementing these films into the classroom, each review consists of a short plot synopsis followed by a brief discussion of the intercultural communication issues illustrated in the film, and a list of potential discussion questions to use with students. Finally, use of the films to help students define culture will be discussed.

Paris is Burning (1990, Rated R, 75 minutes)
(contains some nudity and strong language)

This documentary was filmed in New York in 1987 and 1989 and takes a realistic look at the culture of drag queens. Several queens are interviewed about their participation in "balls", their membership in "houses", and their values, beliefs, attitudes and communication (both verbal and nonverbal). In their own words, older and younger queens describe what it means to be a member of a house, to walk a ball, and to achieve legendary status. Rules, roles and norms of behavior are also obviously displayed in the film.

This film can be used to discuss several concepts. First and perhaps most obvious is the sharing of a common language and the development of slang used only in this community. For example, the queens talk of developing a sense for "reading" others, which means catching and pointing out their flaws. Reading is a form of insult. They also explain the meaning behind the term "voguing" (as can be heard in Madonna's popular song). Voguing is a dance competition (moves are taken from the poses used in Vogue magazine) which takes the place of fighting. Whoever displays the best moves puts the others to shame and achieves respect among the queens.

Stereotypes, both of gay and straight culture, are plentiful in the movie. One of the main purposes of dressing in drag is to convince people that you could pass for not being gay. They discuss what it means to be a white, straight male and the privileges that come with it. Dressing in drag allows them to act out a fantasy, but still be fully accepted for what they

really are. Their self identity is defined by both the dominant straight culture and the gay drag culture.

Finally, the idea of culture being learned is illustrated in this film. Older queens talk of how they learned from queens before them and how they now, as the heads of houses, show others the culture. Walking a ball is a ritual way of entering a house. Many queens become close to the mothers and fathers in their house because their biological mothers and fathers rejected them. The other queens in the house form a family which is accepting.

It is useful to point out that drag queen culture as presented in this film is only a subset of the entire gay community. Majors (1988) provides useful insight into some of the nonverbal elements and values of the gay culture which could be integrated into discussion at this point. Reviews of the film might also be consulted for further detail and comments on the rhetorical implications of the film (Henderson 1992; hooks, 1991).

Potential Discussion Questions:

- Do drag queens constitute a culture? Why or why not?
- How are rules and norms learned? What are they?
- How do these people communicate with one another and those outside the "ball" scene?
- How has the culture changed over the years?
- What are some examples of the unique language? (voguing, shading, reading, pulling a stunt, house, children)
- What are the values and beliefs present in this community?
- What impact has the mainstream culture had?

<u>The Waterdance</u> (1992, Rated R, 106 minutes)

(contains some nudity, adult situations, and strong language)

This film stars Eric Stoltz as Joel Garcia, a man recently paralyzed in a bicycle accident. The movie covers his experiences over several months in the hospital rehabilitation ward. Wesley Snipes plays another paraplegic in the ward, and Helen Hunt play Joel's love interest, Anna, who just happens to be married to another man. While the main focus of the movie is the relationships among the patients and the relationship between Joel and Anna, several scenes could be extracted to show the difficulties faced by people who must adjust to being disabled. At several points, especially in the beginning, the film is shot from the perspective of Joel which allows the viewer a glimpse of life in a wheelchair.

Although this film does not clearly show persons with disabilities interacting on a cultural level, it can be used to discuss issues of what it feels like to be put into a position where you are not like everyone else anymore. The film also indirectly shows how the disabled learn from other disabled people what to expect from ablebodied people. Simulated disabilities (using wheelchairs, blindfolds, earplugs, or slings) can help students understand just a little of what life is like with a disability.

Much has been written regarding persons with disabilities as a culture (Braithwaite, 1988; Braithwaite, 1990; Emery and Wiseman, 1987). Braithwaite's (1990) article could easily be implemented into discussion here. It addresses the adjustment process people face when they become disabled. She argues that

they go from being in the majority to being in the minority and this necessitates learning how to adapt communication. Both Joel and Anna must make adjustments to the new situation which involves some soul searching.

Potential Discussion Questions:

- Considering various disabilities (blind, deaf, cerebral palsy, paralysis), do persons with disabilities form a culture? Why or why not?
- How do people rationalize what has happened to them?
- What are some of the physical, emotional, and value adjustments a recently disabled person might go through?
- How does communication with ablebodied others change? Why?
- What are the stereotypes of persons with disabilities?
- Can ablebodied people ever understand what it means to be disabled? How?
- What are the successes/frustrations experienced by both Anna and Joel or in any interpersonal relationships with people from different cultures?

Where the Day Takes You (1992, Rated R, 107 minutes)

(contains violence, adult situations, and strong language)

This film features several young stars including Lara Flynn Boyle, Ricki Lake, Will Smith, Allysa Milano, and Christian Slater. The story is told through the eyes of the main character, King, who is being interviewed as part of his parole obligations. At various intervals, the film exhibits a documentary style in which the interviewer asks specific questions regarding life on the streets. His answers tell the stories of the trials and tribulations of runaways in Hollywood. The kids learn from one another how to survive and how to take care of each other. They form a family because for some, that is the only family they have, and life under a freeway overpass is better than the abuse they received at home.

Porter and Samovar (1988) would define street gangs and runaways as a deviant subgroup rather than a culture because although they are products of the dominant culture, "their group existence has not persisted long enough nor developed a sufficiently wide enough pattern of deviant behaviors to qualify as a culture or subculture" (p.20). Still, the runaways do form a different group which comprises elements of prostitution culture and the drug culture.

The film does a good job reminding the viewer that the runaways are kids who have been absorbed into street life. They still want to do the things kids do, but they now live by a different set of rules. Stealing and begging for money become important skills. Being able to identify friendly turf from unfriendly turf could save one's life. They must be able to talk their way out of any problem and they adjust their communication accordingly. There is definitely a connection between the kids and a persistent way of life on the streets.

Potential Discussion Questions:

- Do street gangs and runaways constitute a culture or a deviant subgroup? How? Why?
- What are the shared perceptions of these kids?
- What connects these kids? Are the bonded? Do they share a common language or set of values? If so, what are they?
- What are the rules of street life? Is there a code of honor?
- How do kids learn about their "culture" on the street?
- Do the kids experience any culture shock? What is the process of acculturation into street life?
- Is there a protocol for behavior, or do these kids just act on survival instincts?
- What could be done to get kids off the streets?

The Drop Squad (1994, Rated R, 88 minutes)
(contains violence and strong language)

In the spirit of A Clockwork Orange, this dark film addresses the issue of selling out one's racial group. The main character (Eriq LaSalle) works with several other African Americans in the "minority development" department of a EuroAmerican advertising firm, where his job is to create advertisements aimed at the black community. He takes pride in the fact that he is earning a good living and that his managers are happy with his work. However, the work he does is degrading to black people and loaded with stereotypical portrayals.

The film goes on to show an underground group's violent efforts to re-sensitize blacks who have sold out. While these parts of the film are somewhat interesting, segments showing interaction at work and with family could easily be shown by themselves to illustrate the points. Viewing the entire film is not recommended considering "the drop squad" is fictitious and there is no need to subject students to various brainwashing techniques.

Progrebin (1992) discusses the idea of racial identity and having to explain to one's community when relationships outside the race occur. The main focus of this movie is the feelings on both sides when a person's loyalty to their race is questioned. Discussion could center around choosing identity. For example, African Americans are part of mainstream American culture, but they are also part of a racial minority. When and how should one

identify with either group? How does it feel to be rejected by your in-group? What causes the transition?

Potential Discussion Questions:

- What does selling out mean? What is an Uncle Tom?
- Do African Americans (or other cultural groups) need to sell out to be successful in the white male dominated world? Why or why not?
- Why did the lead character's family and co-workers feel he had sold out? Had he? How do feelings of betrayal affect communication?
- How was communication different in the family and work settings for the main character? How do the other black characters in the film communicate?
- Does advertising rely on stereotypes? What are some examples of positive and negative portrayals of various co-cultures in American media?

Higher Learning (1994, Rated R, 126 minutes)

(contains violence, strong language, and sexual references)

This film shows the experiences of several first year students at Columbus University. The film stars Omar Epps, Kristy Swanson, Ice Cube, Michael Rapaport, Tyra Banks, and Laurence Fishburn. Director John Singleton weaves together the stories of several groups and individuals on campus as they struggle through their first year of college. Undergraduate students should be able to identify with many of the issues addressed.

This film is excellent in showing how stereotypes and perceptions affect interactions. For example, the police on campus have stereotypes of blacks as troublemakers and treat them as such even when whites are behaving the same way right next door. Some examples of prejudice are obvious, while others are more covert and potentially more harmful. A focus on the

character of Remy shows how a person with confused ideals looking for acceptance could easily be led astray and brainwashed into thinking that certain people (black, jews, hispanics, lesbians) are a threat to the white race. Issues of discrimination and reverse discrimination are obvious in the film.

The film exposes multifaceted characters and realistic portrayals. It addresses stereotypes and behavior without being stereotypical. Hollywood films often rely on stereotypes because they are familiar to the masses and this familiarity is necessary for success (O'Mara, 1991). The questions raised in the movie address real concerns for many students.

This film could be used to highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and communication among groups on college campuses. While the movie has a tragic ending, the atmosphere of many college campuses is conducive to such violence. Often, colleges which promote diversity while recruiting students, show a different side when the students actually arrive on campus. Segregation and prejudice are still prevalent. Students should be asked what can be done realistically to address these problems.

Potential Discussion Questions:

- What are the stereotypes present in this film? Are they accurate or realistic?
- How does prejudice affect perceptions and behaviors in this film?
- What problems could have been prevented? How?
- How is communication affected by the stereotypes held by the characters?

- How is your personal experience on this college campus similar and different from the film? For example, how do you or others you see interact with other cultural groups on campus? Is there voluntary, informal separation among groups? How can universties promote more cultural sensitivity and understanding?

Conclusion

Obviously each of the films reviewed can be used to show a different perspective of culture. Almost all the films illustrate stereotypes, learning culture, shared world views, acceptance or rejection based on cultural factors, and communication behavior. These films can be viewed at intervals in the semester when the primary issues they address fit the material covered for that week, or they may be viewed outside as homework assignments. A final paper which asks students to define culture and to identify some of the main barriers to intercultural communication shown in the films is a worthwhile assignment. Providing a list of films (more exhaustive than the films reviewed for this paper) dealing with culture and assigning students a particular film to watch and report on to the class could be a useful group activity to provide different perspectives and opinions.

This review is obviously a limited list of helpful tools for the classroom. Every year new films come out which will illustrate intercultural communication concepts and perhaps reveal to the public yet another way of life in a different co-culture. Exposure to different culture, even through film can

help create understanding of how life experiences differ and thus impact perception and communication.

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